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ABSTRACT

This study assessed the effectiveness of the Classroom Assistant Initiative, launched in 1998 and implemented over 3 years. The initiative provided funding for up to 5,000 new classroom assistants in Scottish elementary schools and issued guidelines for their use. The 2-year evaluation, which began in January 2000, used surveys of education authority representatives and school staff as well as interviews and observations in six case study schools. It explored the association between student achievement and use of classroom assistants, investigated whether the initiative enabled better utilization of teachers, and documented the effects of the initiative on classroom interaction and student learning. Results indicated that the initiative had a very positive impact. Respondents believed that the most important contribution of assistants was their flexibility in supporting teachers and students. Many respondents indicated that having an extra adult in the classroom and freeing up teachers was important. Student achievement improved following implementation of the initiative. Finding time for planning and liaison between teachers and assistants remained problematic throughout. Other concerns included future funding, further developments, availability of training for assistants and teachers, clarification of classroom assistants' roles, allocation of time, and impact of the agreement "A Teaching Profession for the 21st Century" on utilization of classroom assistants. (SM)



Insight 1

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Classroom Assistants

Key Issues from the National Evaluation

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Classroom Assistants:

Key Issues from the National Evaluation

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(Scottish Council for Research in Education)

Introduction

The Classroom Assistant Initiative was launched by the Scottish Executive as a pilot programme in 1998 and 'rolled out' over the following three years. It was one of a number of initiatives supported by the Excellence Fund that aimed to raise standards of attainment in Scottish schools. The Scottish Executive provided funding for up to 5000 new classroom assistant posts in Scottish primary schools and issued guidelines for their use to local authorities (SOEID, 1999). The purpose of the initiative was to achieve a ratio of one adult for every 15 pupils in Scottish primary schools, measured across education authorities. The new classroom assistants were to join other non-teaching staff in schools and undertake a range of administrative and support for learning tasks under the direction of classroom teachers.

The initiative was informed by a number of research and policy issues: first, research from the USA suggests that children perform better in smaller classes; and secondly, there was a general belief that teachers could be relieved of some of their non-teaching duties, thus creating more time for teaching. This was the overarching context for the initiative.

National Evaluation of Classroom Assistant Initiative

In January 2000 the Scottish Council for Research in Education (SCRE) began a two-year evaluation of the Classroom Assistant Initiative. It was commissioned by the Scottish Executive Education Department and undertaken with advice from Edinburgh's Telford College, The Scottish Further Education Unit, and the University of Edinburgh. The first task of the evaluation team was to draw together the experiences gained and lessons learnt from the pilot phase of the initiative, make them available more widely and set them in an appropriate context. These have been published elsewhere (Wilson *et al*, 2001) and in this *Insight* the team presents the findings from the main evaluation.

What lessons were learnt from the pilot phase of the Classroom Assistant Initiative in your local authority/school?

Aims of the evaluation

The evaluation had three main aims. These were to:

- explore the association between pupil attainment and the use of classroom assistants comparing different models of deployment
- determine whether the initiative enabled better utilisation of teachers' time
- document the effects of the initiative on classroom interaction and the learning experiences of pupils.

In addition, a number of secondary aims were identified, namely to:

- assess any changes in pupil attitudes or behaviour associated with the use of classroom assistants
- determine how classroom assistants operate in the supervision of pupils and the support of learning
- document how classroom assistants are trained and managed
- identify any problems arising from the implementation of the initiative
- assess any unexpected benefits or disbenefits arising from the initiative.

Design and methods

The evaluation used both quantitative and qualitative methods to collect evidence.

- Education authorities' reports of their pilot programmes were analysed to give a national picture of the initiative at the end of the pilot phase.
- Then a sample of 96 primary schools was drawn from across Scotland. During the autumn term 2000, postal questionnaires were sent to education authority representatives and a range of school staff in the sample schools and interviews and observations undertaken in six case study schools. The key findings were presented in an interim report '*An Extra Pair of Hands?*' (Schlapp *et al*, 2001).
- Finally, the surveys and school visits were repeated in 2001.

Key findings

By September 2001, six months before the target date, approximately 4400 classroom assistants (3900 FTEs) had been appointed. Most primary schools had been allocated at least one classroom assistant. Those without were, for the most part, very small schools with fewer than 10 pupils. Most authorities reported no shortage of suitable applicants for classroom assistant posts. Successful appointees were usually women aged between 35 and 44 years, who had previously worked in schools as parent helpers, special needs auxiliaries or playground supervisors. By 2001, the most common allocation was one classroom assistant to three classes. Support for teachers and pupils was usually the main focus of the role, but many assistants also undertook some whole school administrative and supervisory duties. The majority of classroom assistants who responded to the evaluation were satisfied with their jobs, their hours and conditions of work, but approximately half were dissatisfied with the salaries they received. By the end of the evaluation most authorities employed assistants for 25 hours per week for between £5 and £6 per hour. The range and accessibility of training opportunities for classroom assistants improved over the course of the evaluation, but was not uniform across Scotland. Some classroom assistants received little or no formal training. However, most believed school-based on-the-job support was the most helpful form of development. Approximately a quarter of all assistants would like to undertake teacher training in three to five years' time.

Overall, the impact made by the Classroom Assistant Initiative has been very positive. Education authority representatives, headteachers and classroom teachers believe that the most important contribution of classroom assistants is their flexibility in supporting both teachers and pupils. Many also indicate that having an extra adult in the class and 'freeing up' teachers are important. This *Insight* will focus on three aspects of the evaluation: the impact of the initiative on pupil attainment; the impact on teachers' use of time; and the impact on classroom interactions and pupils' learning experiences. Each will be considered below.

How are classroom assistants currently deployed and utilised in your school?

Has the initiative
had an impact on
pupil attainment?
How do you know?

Impact on pupil attainment

In general, respondents thought that classroom assistants have had an indirect impact on pupils' attainment by allowing teachers to devote more of their own time to teaching. With the limited attainment data available to the evaluators it is impossible to define more precisely the contribution classroom assistants made to raising pupils' attainment. The presence of multiple policies aimed at raising attainment was an additional complication. However:

- The majority of schools participating in this evaluation met or exceeded their targets in June 2001, thus demonstrating an improvement in pupils' attainment in mathematics, reading and writing from 1998 to 2001 (see Figure 1).

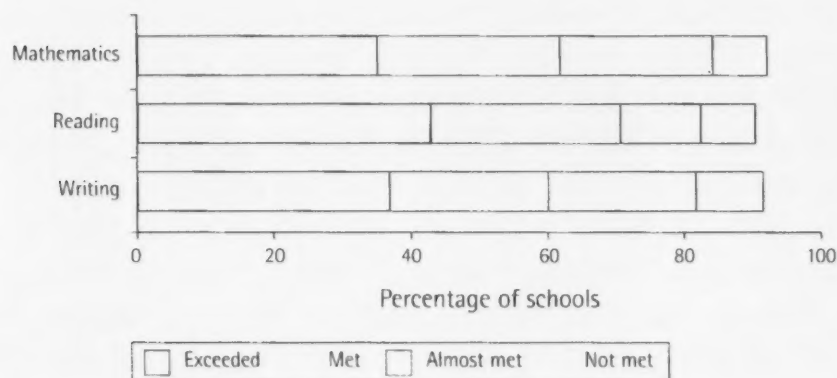


Figure 1: Performance against attainment targets set for June 2001

- During both stages of the evaluation, the researchers received little performance data from schools with which pupil progress could be compared. The data they did receive were often accompanied by comments to the effect that many factors were influencing pupil attainment and disaggregating these was difficult. Other respondents had only recently been allocated classroom assistants and argued that it was too early to attribute any changes in pupils' attainment to their presence.
- Nevertheless, respondents tried to identify the factors which had affected pupil attainment during the period 1998-2001. Early Intervention and the Classroom Assistant Initiative were each identified as important influences by approximately half of the education authority representatives. Headteachers suggested that a wide range of factors had impacted upon attainment in their schools, of which better approaches to teaching and learning, the Classroom Assistant Initiative and whole-school awareness of target setting were the only ones identified by more than 10 individuals. Thus, classroom assistants are seen as contributing to raised standards, but as one headteacher put it, they are only 'one part of a bigger picture'.
- By September 2001 respondents were more confident than earlier in the evaluation that improvements in the attainment of some pupils could be attributed to classroom assistants. A majority believed that classroom assistants would have an impact on attainment more generally in due course. Many suggested that the impact was indirect, resulting from freeing teachers to teach.
- Very few respondents believed that assistants were having no impact on pupil attainment.

Impact on teachers' utilisation of time

Classroom assistants have influenced the way teachers use their time. This is largely because:

- Relationships between classroom assistants and teachers were generally perceived to be good from the outset, and these improved over time.
- Most teachers who worked with classroom assistants thought that they now had more time to spend on teaching, planning and managing learning. Half reported that the quality of their teaching time improved, but a quarter thought that their own use of time had remained the same as before the initiative.
- Teachers identified a number of ways in which classroom assistants had affected their teaching practices (see Figure 2).

In which ways are classroom assistants affecting teachers' use of time?
Is this beneficial?

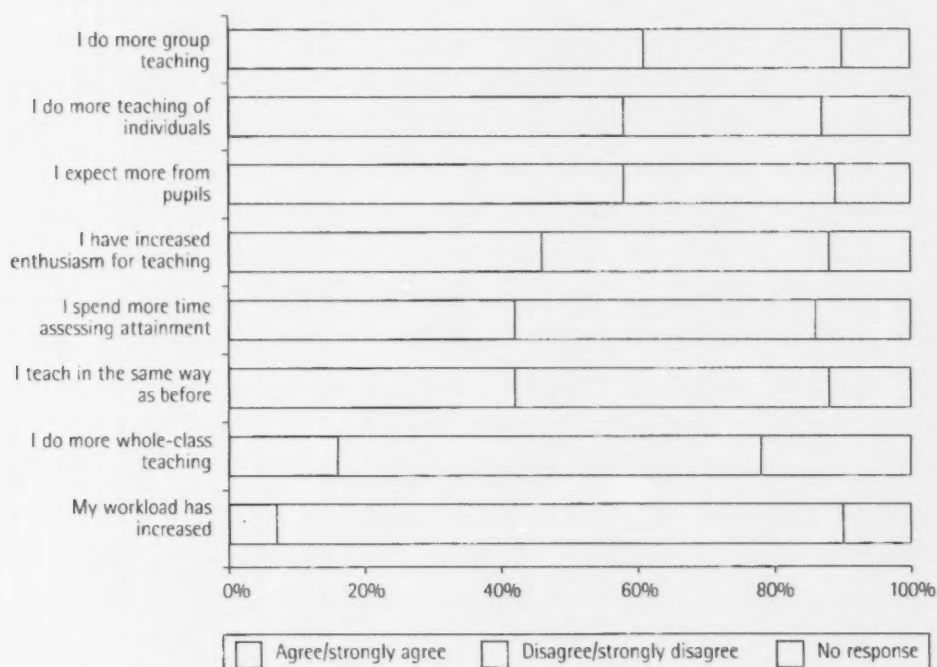


Figure 2: Teachers' views of the impact of classroom assistants on their teaching

- The biggest practical impact has been on the amount of time teachers are able to devote to working with individuals and groups of pupils. Teachers' perceptions have also changed: many agreed that they now expected more from their pupils and had more enthusiasm for teaching as a consequence. Approximately 40% spent more time assessing attainment and a few indicated that they undertook more whole-class teaching. In contrast some teachers reported that they still taught in the same way as before the introduction of classroom assistants. However, very few teachers felt that their workload had significantly increased as a result of working with a classroom assistant.
- Teachers also indicated that classroom assistants enabled them to concentrate on teaching individuals and groups and to spend less time preparing resources and on routine tasks such as registration, handling discipline, and pastoral care.
- Only a minority thought that working with classroom assistants required more time than was gained from the assistant's support.

Impact on classroom interactions and pupils' learning experiences

Classroom practices changed as a consequence of the deployment of classroom assistants, in particular:

- The majority of teachers reported that when a classroom assistant was present pupils spent more time on task and experienced more practical activities and interaction with an adult (see Figure 3).

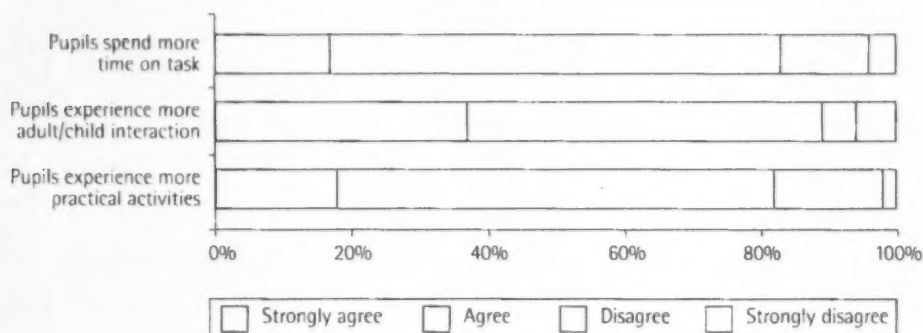


Figure 3: Class teachers' views of the impact of classroom assistants on pupil experiences

- Headteachers, and to a slightly lesser degree teachers, felt that classroom assistants had improved pupils' motivation, and in some cases their behaviour as well.
- Pupils themselves enjoyed working with classroom assistants and appreciated the extra support in the class and elsewhere in school. They clearly distinguished between classroom assistants, whom they saw as 'helpers', and teachers.

Concerns

How can teachers and classroom assistants best use their time together?

There were signs that satisfaction with the initiative was a little less strong than it had been initially and the main stakeholders expressed a number of concerns about its future. Finding time for planning and liaison between teachers and classroom assistants remained problematic throughout. Less than half of the classroom assistant respondents and only a third of teachers believed that they had sufficient time to discuss their work together. Some reported that communication was rushed and lacked depth. Other concerns focused on future funding, further developments (in particular the effects of expanding the initiative into secondary schools), the availability of training for classroom assistants and teachers, clarification of the remit of classroom assistants, allocation of their time, and the impact of the agreement *A Teaching Profession for the 21st Century* (SEED, 2001) on how classroom assistants are utilised.

Finally, it should be noted that most parent respondents were largely unaware of the role played by classroom assistants. The researchers believe that this is a cause for concern if parents are to become full partners in their children's education.

Conclusions

In the third year of operation of the Classroom Assistant Initiative, the picture remained generally very positive. However, although many schools believed that they had successfully resolved initial implementation difficulties, a number of concerns remained.

The main conclusions of this evaluation follow:

Attainment

Attainment in Scottish primary schools has improved since the Classroom Assistant Initiative was launched. However, in the context of multiple policy initiatives aimed at raising attainment it is not possible to quantify the specific contribution of classroom assistants to this improvement. Classroom assistants were widely perceived to contribute to raising pupil attainment by enabling teachers to teach more effectively, and through their own work with individuals and groups of pupils.

Teachers' use of time

Classroom assistants were relieving teachers of many routine tasks and this support made a positive impact on teachers' perceptions of their workload. However, most classroom assistants spent more time supporting pupils, keeping them on task, providing additional support and reinforcement, and supervising them in a wide range of activities.

Classroom Assistants' roles

A number of teachers were still uncertain about how best to balance the allocation of classroom assistants' time between routine tasks and support for pupils. In some cases this caused dissatisfaction, usually because the classroom assistants preferred to spend more time with pupils than undertaking administrative duties. There was evidence that influences such as the agreement *A Teaching Profession for the 21st Century* (SEED, 2001) were shifting the balance of the job from supporting pupils to carrying out routine administrative tasks for teachers in some schools. This issue may benefit from further attention.

Time to plan

Many schools were still finding it difficult to make sufficient time available for teachers and classroom assistants to discuss and plan their work together. There was a perception that the benefits would justify the time spent.

Meeting expectations

Respondents believed some classroom assistants were stretched so far that they were not always able to meet all the expectations of their schools. A number of authorities and schools thought that more classroom assistant support than the initiative has thus far provided was required, if all schools were to benefit fully.

Is there a case for training teachers and classroom assistants together?

Available training

The amount of training provided for classroom assistants has increased considerably during the course of the evaluation, especially since the launch of the Professional Development Award: Classroom Assistants. However, opportunities were not available uniformly across the country and not all training needs were being met.

A package of support materials for teachers working with classroom assistants became available just as the evaluation was coming to an end, so that the authors were unable to judge whether it was addressing teachers' uncertainties about best practice in the use of classroom assistants. It might therefore be useful to explore this issue further. Teachers and headteachers also indicated that meetings with staff from other schools would be helpful as these would allow them to share their ideas about best practice.

Merging support roles

One authority had merged classroom assistant and Special Educational Needs auxiliary roles and budgets; blurring of the boundaries between these roles was also evident elsewhere. Other authorities may choose to formalise this. The researchers believe that this may result in less time being available for classroom assistants to undertake the activities that have led the respondents to regard this initiative as such a success. This issue is another that would benefit from continued monitoring.

What about the future: should support staff roles be combined?

Future developments

Some respondents, especially education authority representatives and headteachers, still have concerns about the future provision and funding of the Classroom Assistant Initiative in Scottish primary schools.

Overall, the initiative has been positively received by the main stakeholders. More importantly, it has affected the way teachers work within the classroom, allowing them more time to devote to teaching, the benefits of which should become increasingly evident as the initiative continues.

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For further information about the research and copies of the full report, please contact Jon Lewin, Dissemination Officer, SCRE, 61 Dublin Street, Edinburgh EH2 3LN. Tel: 0131-557 2944; e-mail: jon.lewin@scrc.ac.uk

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